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Conceptualizations of Privacy in CS Syllabi

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Abstract

Privacy is a broad concept that can take on different meanings for people in different contexts. Thus, the way that students are taught to think about privacy is critical because it will shape the way they approach problems and build solutions in their future careers. All too often, the privacy settings and tools provided by tech companies fail to address the actual needs and values of their users. This is partly because it is easy to lose track of the bigger picture when studying the technical details of privacy-enhancing technologies: What does privacy mean? Why does it matter? We plan to collect and analyze computer science syllabi (and other course materials) to learn about how privacy is conceptualized in undergraduate computer science classes.

Keywords Privacy · Education

1 Introduction

There is no universal consensus on the meaning of the term "privacy" Mulligan et al. [2016], Arora [2019]. The way that people think about privacy influences the tools they build. Although there are a number of factors that influence a person's conception of privacy, one important factor is education. The way that students are taught to think about privacy will shape the way they approach problems and build solutions in their future careers.

We are interested in understanding how undergraduate computer science classes conceptualize privacy. For example, what kinds of privacy harms are students learning about in class? Are certain harms being overlooked? What theories of privacy do computer science students encounter in class? So, we plan to collect and analyze computer science syllabi (and other course materials) to learn about how privacy is conceptualized in undergraduate computer science classes. We are also interested in comparing the content of computer science classes with classes in other fields, such as communication. Through this comparison, we may identify ways that educators across fields can learn from each other.

We anticipate that the growing popularity of learning management systems like Canvas will pose a challenge for this project, because many classes no longer share content through public-facing websites. While it is possible to make courses public on Canvas[1], many courses require you to login to Canvas and these courses usually aren't accessible to people from different institutions. So it is not always easy to find public-facing syllabi and related course content.

We wanted to get a rough sense of the magnitude of this challenge, so the first author selected ten different privacy-related undergraduate courses at ten different institutions. Of those ten, she was able to find public-facing course websites for just half. Putting aside the benefits of public-facing course content for researchers like us, there are a number of other benefits as well. For example, it can be helpful to review existing syllabi when designing a new course. Public-facing course content can also be helpful for students who for one reason or another are not able to register in a class, but are still interested in the material. For example, smaller computer science departments might not offer any classes related to privacy. So, students at these institutions might have to look elsewhere to learn about privacy, and course websites for classes at other universities could be a really valuable resource.

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[1] https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Instructor-Guide/How-do-I-customize-visibility-options-for-a-course/ta-p/844

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